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Filtering, Selection, and Guided Access. (Internet access in public libraries)

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Since the day that access to the Internet, especially the Web, became a reality in public libraries, the debate about how free that access should be became a topic of debate. Controversy already populated the Web when libraries could begin to afford and support access to it. The sense of democratization of information that the Web ushered in created a profound sense of the necessity of giving access to the public on the even playing field of the public library.

As quickly as search engines for culling the gold on the Internet became available, filters for barring the chaff began to appear. While many hoped for a technical solution to the dilemma of inappropriate material for children and public places, such solutions have proven to be less than effective and often chosen by libraries to placate boards and communities or provide some stopgap measure to limit offensive materials on their public machines.

Karen Schneider's ambitious project to evaluate many of these filtering products received much attention and clearly pointed out the limits of filters.[1] Words that are necessary for medical, personal, and sociological research often overlap terminology of less noble pursuits. The technology has not been implemented intelligently enough to distinguish between an intelligent presentation and a hateful discussion of a controversial topic.

One product included in Schneider's study, The Library Channel, provides an interesting alternative to filtering, especially in public libraries. Inclusion of this product in the cadre of filters examined, both in the TIFAP study and in industry groupings in general is a bit misleading. As even Schneider acknowledges in her summary report, this product bills itself as a selection tool, not as a filter.[2]

In the great debate that continues on public Internet access, it is important not to lose sight of the difference between filtering and selection. The former seeks to keep a user from finding or viewing certain types of material. The latter seeks to aid discovery of useful information by only including that which is determined to be worthwhile. It is hard to practice selection without incorporating some amount of filtering in the process. A judgement that something is not useful is a filter of sorts.

In addition to filtering and selection, the whole notion of guided access comes in to play. Pathfinders, reference service, signage, call numbers, shelving strategies, and more devices have always been employed to guide users to the information they seek. We like to think of these devices as providing the service of "saving the time of the reader" but in fact they act as labor saving devices for librarians as well. Personalized service for every patron who walks through a library door is not a practical solution. An ongoing dilemma continues for how to apply and refine these concepts to the unwieldy Web. The Library Channel provides for an interesting case study in dissecting and examining the value of filtering, selection, and guided access when it comes to the Web.

The Library Channel is a product that actually grew from one library's need to find a common desktop to link its many electronic resources and applications. The company that created and sells this product, vImpact, developed proprietary technology it calls VRAD to support a common desktop to serve a structured access to the library catalog, CD-ROM products, the Internet and other desktop applications. That technology serves as the backbone of The Library Channel. When viewed by neighboring library systems, it was quickly realized that this access was not only functional but provided a positive alternative to implementation of filters or other blocking technologies that were being considered and suggested by their boards and communities.

Rather than using blocking technology, The Library Channel relies on selection of sites. In production, the product is quite straightforward, clean, and functional. While it could be considered to be somewhat simplistic, it is in fact the simplicity that is a bit revolutionary in these high-tech times.

The Library Channel provides guided access to the Internet and optionally to other library resources through a directory listing of "worlds" or subjects, not unlike other Internet directories, such as Yahoo. Under each of the eighteen worlds is another level of subheadings defined and customizable to each library. Within each of the subheadings is a "cyber-shelf" full of URLs that have been selected by librarians for inclusion.

The Library Channel provides three levels of access, allowing libraries to implement Internet policies they have decided upon without respect to this product:

- * Access only to sites preselected and included in the menu system. This includes the ability to go to the sites listed without allowing access to links that are not in the same domain.
- * The menu access including an "open" button that allows a user to enter any URL along with the library's ability to link to Internet search engines under one of the subheadings.
- * Limited ability to block by domain name or word in domain name. These must be added one by one by the library.

It is not robust enough to screen 10,000 porno sites, but it could be used to block popular chat rooms or free e-mail sites if library doesn't want patrons using their technology in this manner. But the larger the deselection file becomes, the slower the system becomes, providing a disincentive to heavy blocking. The Library Channel can, however, be run in conjunction with a separate filtering service.

The hierarchy of worlds and subheadings in The Library Channel is an easy-to-understand way to guide users. This is coupled with a simple search feature, which allows users to search general terms that are included in the database of site titles and subjects assigned by librarians. The search feature does not make use of metatags included by site creators.

While this basic approach provides a useful management tool, the work involved in creating a database robust enough to be a useful reference tool could be unworkable for small library systems without enough staff to do large-scale selection. The method used by one library system, the Columbus (Ohio) Metropolitan Library (CML), in order to create a database of about 10,000 URLs in a short three months, was to use a fun and interesting strategy. The creation of a "cyber sweat shop" in their basement allowed up to eight librarians to surf the Web at one time, and seven librarians to add selected sites to the database simultaneously. Library administrators

encouraged participation during off-desk time and paid overtime to ambitious participants. Now that the system has been available to patrons for over a year, the database has grown to include about 23,000 URLs. Their "deselection" list includes about 200 sites.

The Library Channel is an interesting product in an awkward market at an awkward time. In 1997, the Internet Filter Debate raged. Some libraries were just affording access to the Internet and filters were the only technological answers getting attention on how to conform that access to community standards. Librarians, boards, and communities were going through the painstaking task of determining their philosophical stance on the entire access issue. The Library Channel stepped in to provide a solution to filtering. This association took root, and the selection tool became equated with filtering. Almost two years later, vImpact has rethought its marketing strategy.

First, while the The Library Channel has been sold to one corporate library and one college library, vImpact markets The Library Channel to public libraries. The reason for this is not so much that blocking of sites is of utmost interest, but that there is an understanding that the person who comes to the public library most likely does not have Internet access elsewhere and very likely does not have a PC at home. The user is much more inclined to appreciate the structured approach to the Web that is provided. The user needs to know how to read and how to use a mouse, but the rest is largely intuitive. The Library Channel truly does provide an effective way for a librarian to approach the Web with a totally uninitiated user that does not include the investment of time that would be needed to sit someone down at a fully accessible Web screen that is capable of going anywhere but does not inform the user how to do it. There is a labor savings in reference.

Second, The Library Channel is actually designed for two different markets: the library user who wants to find information and the librarian who needs a tool for managing and administering resources. The company believes that it has reached an appropriate balance between fixed and flexible structure of the product.

Third, vImpact has now recognized that not all libraries have the number of staff necessary to build the type of database that CML did--even in one year--let alone in a couple of months. Therefore, the product now includes a core database, with a lease option available to receive updates to that database. This makes the product useful to those working in large urban libraries as well as those working in minimally staffed rural or small town libraries. Future plans include implementing a link exchange program to keep the database growing, and hiring a librarian to administer this database.

Fourth, vImpact has disassociated The Library Channel as a blocking device, but rather pointedly describes it as supporting a library's Internet policy as it stands, or as it may evolve in the future. This was done partly for their own preservation in being able to have libraries reach closure on a decision to purchase or not, and partly to assure the libraries that this product is not meant to solve that problem for them. Again, this is being called a management and selection tool.

Enhancements being considered will make the product more robust. The ability to track usage of worlds, library resources, and subfields is coming. Libraries have always relied on such figures for collection development purposes. This will give libraries a chance to know also if they should be enhancing their database in any or some subject areas of Web resources.

While the evolution of the marketing strategy of The Library Channel provides an interesting case study in examining the filtering, selection, and guided access issue, CML

provides an interesting case study in actual implementation.

CML can verify vImpact's claims that those who come to the library for Internet access are people who don't use the Internet at home. Beth Black, who does public training for CML, says that their classes are largely attended by individuals over fifty-one, tend to attract more women, and elicit such comments as "my kids/ grandkids told me I should get on the Internet," or "I just bought a computer at home and I have no idea what to do with it."

CML does not have a particularly restrictive policy for Internet Web site access. Their policy places responsibility of Internet use in the hands of its users by stating that: "Customers who choose to utilize the Internet should be aware that:

- * Some Web sites contain outdated, incorrect, or biased information.

- * Some Web sites contain information which some people find offensive.

- * Displaying images which are inappropriate for a public place, i.e., do not conform to CML's Materials Selection policy, is not allowed."

It goes on to state that "It is outside the library's mission to provide access to e-mail, discussion groups, chatrooms, and games.

CML has been able to block access to commonly used chat rooms, free e-mail, and games. They have not blocked access to pornographic sites that likely fall outside of their materials selection policy but instead have filled their cybershelves with sites that fall within that scope.

Black says a triumph of The Library Channel implementation at CML includes the fact that there was not one single recorded complaint from the public that the Internet is accessed through this product. She agrees with vImpact's assertion that there are great savings in reference labor by leading people through this product, rather than approaching the Internet cold for each new interaction, claiming that The Library Channel is best of both worlds. There are organized, selected sites for those who don't know how to or don't want to use search engines. It's simple enough for those who don't want to "bother with the Internet." But CML also provides access to a list of search engines, making it possible for users to go anywhere and find anything. CML's satisfaction with The Library Channel has been so strong that, when vImpact went through some reorganization earlier this year, CML began discussions of how to maintain this service in its libraries even if the company failed. (It hasn't.)

While it can be seen that implementation of a product such as The Library Channel can be positive, there may also be reasons that this solution doesn't work everywhere. In 1997, The Library Channel was discussed a bit on the WEB4LIB discussion group. While selection is certainly a concept more in tune with a librarian's sensibilities, one-by-one selection and deselection is labor intensive. Bo Simons stated "So be careful what you wish for, those of you who want complete selection/ deselection, collection-development-type control of an Internet filter, your wish has been granted. Now all you have to do is spend your life looking for bestiality and cumshots and snuff videos and hate groups and build-your-own-bomb sites and build a list to fit your perceived notion of your community's standards." [3] Of course, vImpact has attempted to solve this problem by providing the leased database service. If a library chooses the lease option however, selection is done outside of the library in which it resides.

The level of guided access The Library Channel provides is also controversial. The

Library Channel takes over the desktop. One world is "Library Resources," which includes any paid or subscription services the library wants to provide to users. These may include the library catalog, CD-ROM resources, paid web-based databases, etc. The rest of the worlds are all web sites. Tony Wilder rightfully comments that, "While the Internet is a wonderful tool for libraries, it doesn't replace all the myriad functions we offer and I don't want to give customers the idea that it does." [4] This is reminiscent of the desire librarians had in the late eighties and early nineties when many were networking CD-ROMs to define the ultimate database interface so that they and users wouldn't have to learn a new approach to each resource. Common interfaces restrict educated and educatable users. They may help a person find something, but not necessarily the right thing.

In the mix of the philosophical debate comes the practical reality of library budgets. The Library Channel carries a price tag that would likely range between \$5,000 and \$25,000 for a library, depending on its size and number of public workstations. While it may solve the selection problems faced by a small library system attempting to provide guided access, it may also be too expensive.

Outside of a common desktop such as The Library Channel, other choices for finding websites that were selected by a human agent (as opposed to an artificially intelligent or dumb one) exist. OCLC provides NetFirst, a database like its union catalog which uses the MARC record, AACR2 cataloging rules, and contains materials that libraries have selected. Many other libraries, of course, are building their own lists of useful web sites. This is being done in any number of ways: by reference staff, bibliographers, teams, on html pages, in databases, etc.

There is a growing proliferation of search engines built on selection rather than mass indexing of everything found by robots. (Infomine at <http://lib-www.ucr.edu/>, and The Mining Company at <http://www.theminingco.com/> are but two examples.) But how are the uninitiated to know about these resources?

In the debate over filtering, selection, and guided access, a library must also decide how much of each to incorporate. Different solutions will fit different environments.

References and Notes

- [1.] The Internet Filter Assessment Project Web site at <http://www.bluehighways.com/tifap>.
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